Dr. Karen Cajka

Dr. Karen Lynn Cajka (1966-2011) of Johnson City, Tennessee, died Thursday, November 17.

A native of Somers Point, New Jersey, Karen was deeply committed to family and friends. She graduated cum laude with a B.A. in English from the University of Pennsylvania, received an M.A. from Northeastern University, and a Ph.D. in English from the University of Connecticut. Her dissertation explored “The Forgotten Women Grammarians of Eighteenth-Century England.”

Dr. Cajka was Associate Professor of British Literature and Director of Women’s Studies at East Tennessee State University. A member of the ETSU community since 2004, Dr. Cajka always put her ideals into action. Serving on the Women Studies Steering Committee, she contributed to the design and implementation of a successful and active Women’s Studies major.

Not only did Dr. Cajka participate in laying the groundwork for this interdisciplinary academic program, but she worked on the front lines of Women Studies at ETSU by designing and teaching many of its highly regarded courses, including courses on British Women Authors, Communities of Women, and The Single Woman in London from Evelina to Bridget Jones. Dr. Cajka was selected as Director of Women’s Studies in 2009.

Dr. Cajka dedicated herself to the effort to sustain diversity education across campus. In recognition of her ongoing commitment to diversity awareness and her attentiveness to issues of race/ethnicity, class, gender, sexuality and other forms of difference in her course offerings, Dr. Cajka was awarded the Patricia E. Robertson Diversity Leadership Award and was selected by The President’s Council on Diversity as one of a select number of faculty who were invited to participate in The Diversity Infusion Conference on Curriculum.

Dr. Cajka not only promoted diversity education but also led the way to a more diversity-affirming university climate by proposing, designing, and teaching the first course in Gay and
Lesbian Literature in the history of ETSU. Due to this course’s subject matter and the rigor of investigation that Dr. Cajka brought to it, it is now a regularly offered and highly popular course in English and Women’s Studies.

In addition to championing diversity issues through the multiple leadership roles she held in English and Women’s Studies; her service on university, college and departmental committees; and her active research that sought to recover women’s writing from the Eighteenth Century; Dr. Cajka was a brilliant, innovative, challenging, and compassionate classroom teacher. Dr. Cajka’s commitment to her students was obvious to everyone who knew her, especially her students, and her classroom was one that feminist/scholar/teacher bell hooks would describe as “transformative.”

Social justice, tolerance, and diversity were not merely causes for which Dr. Cajka brandished a flag on special days or at highly visible public marches; they were the ideals that framed the way she lived her everyday life. In the forward to “This Bridge Called My Back: Writings by Radical Women of Color,” Gloria Anzaldúa writes that words without actions are empty; she urges us to put our words into action. Dr. Cajka was the embodiment of what Anzaldúa is trying to articulate.

It was in the small, maybe even over-looked, daily acts that Dr. Cajka provided a role model for us all. Dr. Cajka promoted not just causes but people. She was a colleague, teacher, and friend. On occasions too many to list here, Dr. Cajka promoted the work of junior faculty as well as her students, mentored her colleagues and advisees, and extended the embrace of inclusion even when it may not have been popular to do so.

Dr. Cajka was a woman whose life imitated her words and whose words became her life. Dr. Cajka’s service to ETSU and the larger academic community, her work with and support of her students, and her daily life epitomized a life well lived through a sustained commitment to diversity and social justice for all.

--Dr. Phyllis Thompson